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ABSTRACT

Achieving literacy, while often one of the greatest challenges a child can face, is one of the most important elements in building a base for success in education and in life. Three main strategies are found to be parts of the process of how children learn to read: (1) developing phonemic awareness through the use of phonics techniques; (2) being read to on a daily basis; and (3) implementing literacy tasks to motivate and build appreciation for reading, such as open tasks or tasks where students are in control of both what they create and the processes they use to create it. When students can choose stories or tasks in which they are interested, they will exert more energy and effort learning the material and will show more responsibility for their work. One way of continuing interest among proficient readers is by connecting stories and literature to content studies in school. To sustain appreciation and motivation among all levels of readers, chosen texts should be comprehensible and coherent. (Contains seven references.) (CR)

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ED 414 561

Achieving Literacy for All Students:
Beginning Readers and Proficient Readers

By Leslie Lewis

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Achieving literacy, while often one of the greatest challenges a child can face, is also one of the most important elements in building a base for success in education and in life. Reading and writing are essential tools for communicating, knowing, learning, and understanding, and the question of the best way to teach these skills to children is one that is widely disputed and yet unanswered. This essay addresses the skill of reading in particular, and explores some of the research that exists on different ways that children learn to read. It also examines important strategies and essential steps that must be taken to help beginning readers feel confident and learn to appreciate reading. In addition, it takes a look at how proficient readers read, and the importance of motivation as children move beyond the beginning level.

Throughout my research, although several important factors for learning to read were discussed, I found three main strategies that seem to be invaluable parts of the process of how children learn to read. The first of these is developing phonemic awareness. Before most children even enter first grade, they have already developed a sense that words are made up of sounds. Without this level of awareness children cannot learn the necessary letter-sound relationships that are required in learning to read (Beach, 1996). Developing this phonemic awareness is in part achieved through the use of phonics techniques. Phonics is the study of speech sounds related to reading, and is designed to help students decode unknown words (Gunning, 1996). The use of phonics has come under attack by critics who claim that less emphasis should be placed on the way letters and sounds correspond and more focus should be placed on whole words and stories. However, it is widely agreed that phonics must be addressed to some degree in any reading program, for it has been established that phonics instruction is necessary for the majority of

beginning readers (Collins, 1997).

Another essential step in learning to read is being read to on a daily basis, if possible. Teachers hold a great responsibilty here, and should be encouraged to read aloud to their class as often as possible. Reading aloud to students benefits beginning readers in several ways. First of all, it motivates children to read themselves. In addition, it can help children to develop a story sense and promote knowledge of different styles of literacy (Bruneau, 1997). While it is imperative that teachers read aloud in their classroom, it is equally if not more important for parents to read to their children at home. Not only does this allow a more personal and sharing experience, it also gives the parent a sense of how their child is progressing in reading. Discussing and interacting with a story also helps to create meaning and build context, which helps to balance a pure phonics approach. Students will often be much more eager to reread a story they have heard before. With parents and teachers working together in this area, beginning readers can reap the many benefits of being read aloud to.

In addition to phonemic awareness and reading aloud, mere appreciation and motivation for reading is invaluable for the beginning reader. If the desire to read doesn't exist, the road to becoming a proficient reader will be all the more difficult and painstaking. If students don't know why they are learning a certain skill, they will be much less enthusiastic about learning it. There are several literacy tasks that can be created to help motivate and build appreciation for reading. These tasks are also referred to as open tasks, or tasks where students are in control of both what they create and the processes they use to create it (Paris & Turner, 1995). Open tasks do not specify procedure or result in one correct answer, as opposed to closed tasks where work is structured and specific. The first thing open tasks provide to help create motivation is choice.

When students can choose stories or tasks they are interested in, they will exert more energy and effort learning the material and will show more personal resposibility for their work (Paris & Turner, 1995). Another motivator is challenge. Engaging students in challenging tasks helps them to reach new understandings and make new discoveries. It is important, however, to be careful not to make tasks too challenging, as this could result in frustration. Tasks that are too easy, on the other hand, can result in boredom (Paris &Turner, 1995). A final motivating factor for beginning readers is an emphasis on strategies for constructing meaning. By giving students several strategies to choose from to help with decoding and comprehension, they can acquire an understanding of what literacy is and how to use and understand it (Paris & Turner, 1995). Guided reading is an excellent way to provide beginning readers with this understanding, as it offers them several ways to determine unknown words, including looking at pictures and rereading.

Learning to read, then, is a process that is composed of many different, interdependent components. Once children have gained the skills necessary to become proficient readers, it is possible that less emphasis be placed on reading instruction and encouragement. However, that would be extremely dangerous, for proficient readers are still in the learning process, and are finetuning their skills at a more advanced level. In fact, I discovered in my research that proficient readers require some of the same tools as beginning readers, most specifically the motivation. It is very important for appreciation of literature to be encouraged beyond the beginning level in order for students to continue their interest in reading. One way of continuing interest among proficient readers is by connecting stories and literature to content studies in school. The content that children study in school may often seem unrelated and unconnected to

their lives, and looking at content through the eyes of a character in a story, perhaps, can help them identify with experiences and make content more meaningful (Johnson & Smith, 1994). Through the integration of literature throughout the curriculum, students can gain a new appreciation for books, realizing that literature is a powerful tool for understanding and learning and for gaining greater insight about the world and themselves.

Another way to sustain appreciation and motivation among proficient readers is to make sure that text given to students is comprehensible and coherent. There are few things more discouraging than struggling to make sense of unorganized or incoherent text, and this discouragement can dampen the desire to read in any context. The best way to assure that text is comprehensible and readable is to provide students with proper background knowledge before introducing certain readings. In a study performed on this subject, it was found that students with prior knowledge of a subject area, in addition to more coherent texts, had a much greater comprehension level than those students who were not given prior knowledge (McKeown et al., 1992). Again, comprehension of what is being read has a large role in building appreciation for reading, and is essential in any curriculum.

In conclusion, learning to read and appreciate reading is a journey that continues throughout a child's education and throughout their lives. Beginning readers must learn strategies and attain phonemic awareness while also being given an appreciation of literature and stories that will motivate them to want to read. A balanced combination of reading activities is key in any reading teacher's instructional plan, and serves to offer children the best chance at becoming successful readers while also creating and sustaining interest. When meaning and justification for learning the skill of reading are present in a child's mind, they will be

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much more likely to pursue achievement of that skill. The same can be said for proficient readers as well. By giving children meaningful, contextual stories that they can relate to both their life and the content being learned in school, literature can become a strong tool for understanding. Coherent and comprehensible text will help to build appreciation for reading as well, an appreciation that will carry with them throughout the rest of their lives. Teachers in any grade, while choosing reading strategies, stories, or texts, must constantly ask themselves if what they have chosen will benefit all their students and help create and sustain desire for reading. The minds of one's students depend on it, and seeing the sparkle in a child's eye when they pick up a book is the greatest reward imaginable.

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